

Renew our commitment

BY BILL NELSON
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As the one-year anniversary of Haiti's devastating earthquake looms, it's appropriate that we reflect on the gravity of the situation there today.

It will be a year ago on Jan. 12 that Haiti lost 230,000 men, women and children in a tragedy of almost unimaginable proportions.

The citizens of Haiti are trying to pick up the pieces. But additional international relief is still imperative if we wish to save tens of thousands more Haitians who are sick or impoverished -- and if we wish for Haiti to survive as a nation.

As we reflect on the perilous situation, we should realize that we can play a critical role in Haiti's future. And we should know the security of our home state of Florida is at issue, too.

When I went to Haiti a year ago, I saw firsthand that the disaster had killed tens of thousands, destroyed countless homes, schools, roads, buildings and communications. Injured children were dying in the streets without proper medical care.

Over the past year, the path to recovery has been arduous: An estimated one million Haitians remain homeless or are still living in shelters. A vicious outbreak of cholera has made conditions worse and threatens tens of thousands more. And the government remains crippled after disputed and unresolved elections.

As a result, Haiti could actually spiral out of control. This is why we must continue helping Haiti to rebuild. It's also why I am working with several of my Senate colleagues to urge President Obama to renew U.S. commitment to the people of Haiti. Our steadfast support is both right and righteous.

We bear a moral responsibility to improve the lives of some of the poorest people in our hemisphere, but we also should act in our own national security interest.

As history has shown, failed states create local vacuums of power, the effects of which are felt far beyond troubled borders. Misery and despair can become the seeds for violence and instability. This we neither want nor need in our backyard.

Haiti's economic and political survival is in our state's interest as well. Florida is one of the first places to feel the shockwaves from any crisis in the Caribbean. Just two weeks ago, the U.S. Coast Guard rescued and repatriated 80 Haitian migrants who had crowded into an overloaded wooden sailboat in search of a better life.

If the situation there were to grow much worse, untold numbers of desperate Haitians could take to the sea.

Common sense, then, tells us to keep fighting for a stable, self-sufficient and ultimately prosperous democracy, and that our efforts to save Haiti will not be in vain. Our humanitarian support and disaster assistance will help address both the root of the problems and provide for those who are most vulnerable to exploitation.

If we do not renew our commitment to Haiti, we harm not only Haitians, but also Americans, and surely Floridians.

As the Good Book tells us: we should open wide our hand to our brother, to the needy and to the poor.

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